

*Is American culture a sustainability problem?*

Sustainability Problems Debate #3

Word Count: 2064

Kyle M. Maggy

10/26/12

## **Introduction**

As people know it, Spanish Conquistadors discovered the America's. This is, of course, if you disregard the Native Americans, like many of the early Western Europeans did. Since this time there has been a constant battle between humans and the natural environment in what is now known as the United States of America. First it was manifest destiny; God wanted the settlers to reap the bounties of the newly discovered continent. Next was the industrial revolution, fueled by the further exploitation of natural resources. Finally, it seems history became cyclical, economic downturns were followed by war, and war was followed by a temporarily flourishing economy; all of this was fueled by the land. Frontier after frontier was discovered and then destroyed. As early as the late 1800's, skeptics of "The American Way" began to rally against this cycle. Only these few noticed or spoke out against Americans' unsustainable lifestyle, which was at the cost of the environment and the lower socioeconomic classes. As time progressed, the imbalance of power heightened. Politics and American democracy became tangled in the interests of large corporations, and little has changed since then. Humans are still living as conquistadors and explorers, but all that is left now is a technological frontier. This frontier is what "American Culture" claims to be the answer to all problems, including sustainability. While others, fear that this frontier is the tipping point. What created this bi-polar spectrum of thought, and is "American Culture" in itself a sustainability problem? These are questions this debate will explore.

## **Argument**

Is American culture a sustainability problem? The affirmative position believes so; caused by consumerism, materialism, laissez faire markets, risk management, and faulty democracy all play a large role in American culture, directly creating numerous sustainability problems. However, the negative position does not believe this to be the case. They believe that "The American Way" is the right way, the only way. This more modern view still holds many similar beliefs to that of Manifest Destiny and Calvinism. Americans are blessed with an abundance of resources and should use all the resources presented to them, remaining as a leading world power. The negative position believes that American culture can discover a technological solution to any problem, thus there are no sustainability problems.

## **Stakeholders**

In this debate, the American people are not the only stakeholders. Considering the affect American culture has on other countries, all global citizens hold a stake in this debate. Like in most sustainability debates, corporations and politicians hold a significantly large stake. For obvious reasons, what is left of the natural environment on Earth also holds a stake. However, this stake is currently at a high risk of being washed away. Many citizens, politicians, and corporations will not stop at any cost in order to satisfy their perceived unlimited needs and wants.

## **Affirmative Position**

### **Overview**

American culture is, and directly creates, numerous sustainability problems. From consumerism to faulty democracy, and everything in between, it all seems to contribute to and create more sustainability problems. For the most part, Americans place material wealth and personal standard of living above everything else. American culture is about individual freedom, satisfying personal goals, and only uniting when something goes terribly wrong. The pursuit of economic well-being is often the sole goal for many corporations, politicians, and American Citizens. It is a battle between individuals trying to satisfy their needs and wants at the cost of the environment and other less well off people. To further illustrate the position, I will emphasize the inherent flaws with putting the economy first, especially when the economy runs on the concept of risk management and limited government regulation, rather than strict governance and taking preventative actions.

### **Support – Addicted to Risk<sup>1</sup>**

Granted she is a Canadian, Naomi Klein hit the nail on the head, Americans are addicted to risk. Sometimes an outside observer can see the picture more clearly. American culture is willing to put anything on the line for simply a small incremental increase in economic wellbeing, material wealth, or standard of living, at the cost of the environment and the lower classes. Individuals do it, families do it, and corporations do it. All the while with no back up plan or exit strategy. This explains why almost every American household and the government are in debt, it explains why the natural environment is being destroyed more and more every day, and it explains why the imbalance of wealth and power continues to grow in the United States. Worst of all, American culture cannot learn from its past mistakes. We continue to let the economy bubble, and then act surprised when it bursts. But, this is simply the nature of American culture; managing risk. While many sustainability problems like climate change require people to take preventative measures, American culture continues to do otherwise because the culture believes it can manage the risk. Just like American culture believes it can simply use the technological frontier as a way to bypass its current problems. Historically we have seen this thought process fail time and time again. The only explanation to this repetition is greed, overconfidence, and pretentiousness. Will optimism can be great in many situations, it should not be the basis for a culture. Americans simply assume things will get better, and because of this the culture is at a stand still. No actions are being made because everyone assumes that someone else will solve the problem. The truth is that this is not the case. Many sustainability problems are looming, from energy to infrastructure to democracy. American culture is a gambling addict. We keep throwing away resources in the hope that they will yield a larger win. American culture believes that remaining the worlds leading superpower is enough to sustain itself, and that technology will always provide a solution when in

desperate need, but this is not the case. American culture is a sustainability problem experiencing the snowball effect.

## **Flaws**

While the affirmative position does have a strong case with American consumerism, riskiness, corporate greed, “dirty” energy, materialism, laissez faire markets, and imbalanced democracy, there are a few flaws with the argument. First off, the position in itself is very general. While many aspects of American culture are sustainability problems, other parts are not. America produces brilliant scientists, inventors, writers, engineers, and philosophers, who lead the way in solving many sustainability problems. Second, Americans do have a relatively good track record of solving major problems. Although Americans tend to procrastinate in implementing sustainability solutions, at a base level American culture has sustained or endured many obstacles. Finally, American culture seems to be changing course. Since the financial collapse of late 2008, many movements concerned with sustainability have resurfaced. Many citizens are fed up with the directions of which the environment, the economy, and the government are moving.

## **Negative Position**

### **Overview**

There is one way to do things, and it is the American way. This is the essence of the negative position. The position is very optimistic towards the future in that the future will perpetually “progress” and get better. Perhaps it is hope that makes this position attractive to many Americans. Consumerism, materialism, and pride make many people feel happier. Isn’t that what it is all about? American culture is not a sustainability problem because there are no sustainability problems. American culture can solve any complex problem. Free-markets will not allow any drastic changes to take place. If so-called cleaner energy becomes more profitable it will be adopted, and all will be well. American culture is about providing individuals with basic freedoms: the ability to consume, the ability to be comfortable, and the ability to advance socioeconomic classes. American culture has mechanisms that will work out the kinks without government intervention. If a problem did exist, American culture would certainly address it immediately. American culture has sustained itself for 200 years, and it will continue to do so in the future, whether it is on this planet or another. This position is exceptionally powerful; it recognizes that every American has good intentions and that they are willing to unite unanimously to conquer any problem. American culture is not a problem; it is a supreme problem solving force. To support this position, I will share the wise thoughts of former movie star Ronald Reagan. May his thoughts trickle-down to all supporters.

## **Support - Ronald Reagans Announcement of Candidacy for President<sup>2</sup>**

God has blessed America. America is a dominant force in the world. Fellow global citizens recognize Americans for their non-arrogant pride and extreme generosity without asking or requiring anything in return. America is not a bully, America is never mean. America is a mentor to the rest of the globe. The future will in fact be a great place, with a flourishing economy and high standard of living for all worthy. Unidentifiable experts that claim that America faces great trouble in the future are wrong. Through smart goals and measured progress, America can maintain its proud position in the world. To do so, we must keep the economy moving forward fueled by cheap energy, no matter what the source is. The best condition to progress under is having a weak federal government. A few worthy politicians and successful corporations will lead the way. With low taxes for all, we can maintain our infrastructure, create jobs, and keep funding necessary projects. However, the most important thing is that America remains number 1. As long as we are a world leader all will be well. America is not any kind of problem. Would God bless a sustainability problem?

## **Flaws**

Which one? Aside from sounding like the basis for the Romeny/Ryan campaign, the position is still very ignorant. The negative position personifies America as being something like that of a professional sports team; as long as America is better than everyone else, every American will be happy. The only problem recognized by the position is that some Americans are deviating from Gods intentions. The negative position assumes that the future will be better. Some call this optimism, and many smart people would call this stupidity. It has been proven time and time again that free-markets and a hand off approach by government will not protect the interests of citizens, nor will it protect the environment or the economy.

## **Factoring Sustainability into Risk and Credit Rankings<sup>3</sup>**

What if sustainability measures could be factored into risk management and credit rankings? In a sense, it would create a new hybrid risk management system. Although this system would not quite be preventative, it would provide citizens, investors, businesses, and countries with more complete data. This data would increase transparency by pointing out the environmental and sustainability impacts of the entity under questioning. Previously, several studies have investigated how sustainability could be implemented into both global and domestic measures of growth, but now researchers are working on way to implement sustainability measures into more narrow ratings and indexes. Failing to account for externalities and natural resources skews current financial models. Recently studies have been done correlating a country's level of sustainability and its financial debt credit rating. Another study suggests creditworthiness is heavily dependent on sustainability. Perhaps implementing these new rating systems is the first step towards a green economy. Albeit not a perfect solution, it is a step in the right direction. It seems to be a potential solution that opposing sides could agree on.

## Personal Perspective

I believe that the current state of American culture is indeed a sustainability problem. That being said, not all is bad about American culture. As much as it is a problem, American culture can be a catalyst in the fight against sustainability problems. America's greed, consumption, riskiness, and creating of externalities for the rest of the globe must be halted. At the same time, American citizens have the power to unite to solve sustainability problems through the implementation of localized solutions and demanding preventative regulation by elected officials. Americans are equipped with all the tools necessary to change the direction the country is currently moving. It is a matter of rechanneling environmental, social, and economic forces. American culture is not inherently bad or corrupt; but it does pose a threat to the globe if it is not reformed. To sum up my personal perspective, American culture is currently a sustainability problem; however, with even the slightest reform, America could lead the global sustainability efforts.

## Citations

<sup>1</sup>*Addicted to Risk*. Perf. Naomi Klein. *TED*. TED, Jan. 2011. Web. 26 Oct. 2012.  
<[http://www.ted.com/talks/naomi\\_klein\\_addicted\\_to\\_risk.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/naomi_klein_addicted_to_risk.html)>.

<sup>2</sup>Reagan, Ronald. "OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT OF CANDIDACY FOR PRESIDENT." Address. *Reagan 2020*. 13 Nov. 1979. Web. 26 Oct. 2012.  
<[http://reagan2020.us/speeches/candidacy\\_announcement.asp](http://reagan2020.us/speeches/candidacy_announcement.asp)>.

<sup>3</sup>Zadek, Simon. "Sustainability Should Be the True Measure of US Creditworthiness." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 15 Aug. 2011. Web. 29 Oct. 2012.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/aug/15/sustainability-us-credit-standard-and-poors>>.3